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AUTHOR Harkness, Sara; Super, Charles M.
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ABSTRACT

Recent American research has explored developmental trends in gender segregation of children's peer groups. However, it is important to differentiate systematic trends in children from systematic changes in their environments. This report, based on data gathered from 1972 to 1975, presents evidence on gender segregation in Kipsigis children's peer groups in Kokwet, a rural community in Kenya. Gender segregation is examined in culturally characteristic settings and is discussed in relation to both developmental and cultural issues. Observational data from 152 children ages 18 months to 9 years reveal that there is no segregation by gender in peer groups until around the age of 6. At that time, changes in settings, parental expectations, and customary duties result in an increase in the proportion of same-sex peers in the peer group. Even within this pattern, there is some evidence that children do not interact more with same-sex peers. A contrast is drawn with the adult pattern of gender segregation, and emphasis is given to the importance of culture and development as interactive systems. (Author/RH)

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The Cultural Context of Gender Segregation in Children's Peer Groups

Sara Harkness and Charles M. Super
Judge Baker Guidance Center and Harvard University

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Running Head:

GENDER SEGRETATION IN CHILDREN'S PEER GROUPS

A preliminary version of this paper was presented in J. Rubenstein (Chair), Gender segregation in the peer group: Social and affective consequences, symposium conducted at the meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Detroit, Michigan, April, 1983. The research reported here was supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the William T. Grant Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and the National Institute of Mental Health (grant #33281). All statements made and views expressed are the sole responsibility of the authors.

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ABSTRACT

Recent American research has explored developmental trends in gender segregation of children's peer groups. It is important to differentiate, however, systematic trends in children from systematic changes in their environments. Observational data are presented from 152 rural Kenyan children ages 18 months to 9 years. There is no gender segregation in peer groups until around age 6, at which time changes in settings, parental expectations, and customary duties result in an increase in the proportion of same-sex peers. Even within this pattern, however, there is some evidence that children do not interact more with same-sex peers, given their greater presence. A contrast is drawn with the adult pattern of gender segregation and emphasis is given to the importance of culture and development as interactive systems.

The Cultural Context of Gender Segregation in Children's Peer Groups

The contribution of peer relations to the socialization of children has recently received increased attention in the developmental literature. Hartup (1983, p. 103), in his comprehensive review, asserts that "In most cultures, the significance of peer relations as a socialization context is rivaled only by the family." One is hard pressed to think of a culture in which this is not the case; in fact, current scientific interest in peer relations reverses a long-standing bias in Western psychology which overemphasized the role of parents, especially the mother, as socialization agents.

Among the characteristics of children's peer groups as contexts for social learning, the tendency of boys and girls to associate preferentially with members of their own sex has frequently been noted: Hartup (1983, p. 109) states, "Children of all ages associate more frequently with members of their own sex and like them better." Recent research has suggested that this tendency appears early in the opening years of life. In middle childhood and early adolescence, according to Hartup, the

tendency towards behavioral dimorphism becomes so pronounced that "No observer would question the fact that children avoid the opposite sex in middle childhood and adolescence" (p. 110).

As with other aspects of children's social development, the influence of contextual factors on the nature and extent of sex segregation in children's peer groups is difficult to separate from ontogenetic factors, especially in a monocultural research tradition. Most of the observations on children's peer behavior have been carried out in settings characterized by large groups of same-age children, that is, in schools. Since school experience in American culture is closely tied to age, there is a danger, as we have discussed elsewhere (Harkness, 1980; Super & Harkness, in press) that the structure of development may be confused with the structure of the environment.

Although the role of the environment in producing regularities in the development of children's behavior may not be salient when all the research has been carried out within limited and familiar contexts, its importance becomes more evident when the behavior is observed in a different culture. Comparisons with other cultures become especially valuable when they lead to further questioning about the functions served for the developing child by particular kinds of behavior in particular settings.

This report presents evidence on gender segregation in children's peer groups in a rural community of Kenya. Gender segregation during the first nine years of life is examined in

culturally characteristic settings and is discussed in relation to both developmental and cultural issues.

Method

The data to be reported here were collected during three years of research on child development and family life in the community of Kokwet, a Kipsigis settlement in the western highlands of Kenya. Like many other highland East African peoples, the Kipsigis are patrilineal and traditionally engaged in hoe agriculture and cattle herding; more recently, communities like Kokwet have adapted to the modern economy through cash and dairy farming, while still retaining many features of traditional life. The community of Kokwet consists of 54 households established on land repatriated from the British at national independence in 1963. Although as a government-sponsored "settlement scheme" Kokwet is intentionally modern in some agricultural practices, the community remains traditional in many significant respects: at the time of our research (1972 to 1975), most adults had little or no schooling, few men worked at salaried jobs away from the homesteads, cows were still used for the customary brideprice, polygyny was the preferred form of marriage for many, and virtually all adolescents still chose to undergo the traditional circumcision ceremonies.

Many features of child life in Kokwet, as elsewhere, are derived from the economic and social organization of adult life. The work of mothers in Kokwet includes farming on the family fields, as well as gathering firewood and bringing water from the river, preparing food, and being responsible for the care of the children. Fathers are in charge of the cows, plowing the fields when new crops are to be planted, major repairs around the property, and the important political business of the community.

Children also are essential contributors to the economic well-being of the household. Large families are preferred, and family size averages over six children for each mother. Children help in taking care of younger siblings, watching the cows, weeding the gardens, running errands, and many other chores. One striking aspect of these childhood tasks is the age at which children are expected to carry out important responsibilities. It is not unusual, for example, to see a child of three chasing a calf out of the garden. The children responsible for taking care of babies are usually about eight to ten years old, and may be as young as five or six. The general scene, then, is one in which life for all members of the family centers around the homestead, and all are participants in work as well as sociability and leisure.

Within this cultural setting, a large corpus of observations of children's social behavior was collected. Running records of naturally occurring behavior in the home were written and later

coded according to a modification of the system developed by the Whitings (see Whiting, 1980).

Sample 152 children were selected from a recent census to be representative of variation within the community and balanced on sex and age (from 18 months to 9 years); a majority of children in Kokwet were included.

Procedure Observations were carried out by a trained local observer who went to the homesteads 4 times (9 am, 11 am, 3 pm, and 5 pm) on different days. (Two cases were incomplete, yielding a total of 606 observation sessions). Each observation lasted 30 minutes, and during this time the children and families were asked to carry out normal activities. Thus the observer would accompany the child as he or she went to the river and fields, as well as sit unobtrusively in the hut to observe the child's activities there. In the relatively fluid, mostly outdoor setting of daily life, this procedure seemed comfortable to all concerned and the recorded behaviors and activities are consistent with casual observations throughout three years of residence in the community. Recording consisted of writing in narrative form every individual behavior (e.g. draw with stick in dirt), social act (e.g. ask mother for food), or social activity (e.g. sitting quietly with sister) by the focal child, and every response from others (e.g. mother gives food) or social act (e.g. sister tells brother to come help) directed toward the focal child. Aspects of the immediate social context, such as the cast

of characters present, the location, and the ongoing activities, were also noted. Brief excerpts from the running records are available elsewhere (Harkness & Super, in press).

Coding was carried out by American assistants who were trained in interpreting the Kipsigis material. Each social act, response, or social activity was scored as one of nearly one hundred kinds of goal-directed behavior directed by specified "actors" toward "target" persons.

Analysis In order to describe the composition and interaction patterns of children's peer groups, the actors, targets, and others present were categorized by sex and age level (infancy to three years, three to six years, and six to nine years). Two-way analysis of variance (Age X Sex) was then used to address two main questions. First, did boys and girls at any age level form peer groups in which one sex or the other predominated? The dependent measure was calculated as the percent of males (vs. females) of the same age level surrounding each child in the observed group. Second, did boys and girls at any of these age levels preferentially choose children of one sex or the other as targets of social interaction, given whatever distribution of peers existed? The dependent measure in this analysis was the percent of acts directed by each child to male (rather than female) children of the same age level; the percent of male peers present was subtracted to adjust for available targets and non-differential behavior should thus yield an

average score of 0. In addition, the cast of characters present was analyzed in terms of relationships between the target child and peers (whether family members or neighbors), and whether the mother was present or not.

Results

The behavior observations show children involved in a variety of activities, including many chores as well as social play, in and around their living compounds. The number of people present normally varied from 5 to 8, usually members of the child's immediate family, half-siblings, or neighbors, including infants as well as adults. Thus the potential "targets" for children's social behavior span a wide age range as well as including both sexes.

In the analysis of the percent of males in children's peer groups in relation to Age and Sex of the actor, a main effect of Sex was found: F (1, 315) = 4.31, $p < .04$. This proved secondary, however, to an interaction between Sex and Age, which had a more powerful effect on peer group composition: F (2, 315) = 10.32, $p < .0001$. As illustrated by the solid lines in Figure 1, the proportion of male peers present was very similar for boy and girl actors in the two younger age categories, but diverged sharply for the six-to-nine-year-old children. Further analysis at each age level confirms that the sex difference in gender

composition of peer group is reliable only at the oldest age. (Re-analysis using an arcsine transformation of the percents did not alter the results.)

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insert Figure 1 about here

The second analysis, on the choice of targets within the peer group, showed no significant main effects or interactions: neither boys nor girls of any age category differentially chose children of one sex or the other as targets of social interaction. Thus the trends for choice of targets by boys and girls at each age level, not adjusted for the availability of targets, parallel the trends in the sex ratio of those present (Figure 1, broken lines). Although there was a high proportion of instances in which only one peer was present (and thus there was no opportunity for choice), examination of the smaller number of cases with choice suggest the overall finding is accurate.

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insert Table 1 about here

Age differences were found in the relationships between the target children and their peers. In all the age groups the most likely peer was from the same homestead, that is, a sibling or half-sibling (Table 1). Among the 3-6 year olds, the next most likely peer comes from an adjacent homestead. For the

oldest children, this is not the case, and the peer is equally likely to come from a more distant household. The youngest children are also often found with peers from a non-adjacent homestead, but this seems to be part of a different pattern of social contacts. Mothers often take their very young children with them on visits around the community, but they do not take older children. Thus, the presence of a peer from a non-adjacent household could be due to a visiting mother with baby, or to the target child itself being observed while with the mother on a visit. Hence, in the oldest age group, but not the youngest, peers from non-adjacent households are likely to result from the children's own choice of companions.

Discussion

Social life for the infant in Kokwet does not start out primarily in an isolated dyad, as is the case for large numbers of American babies. Rather, from the beginning the young Kipsigis baby is usually found in a social group that includes the mother, several siblings and half-siblings. The average number of companions in Kokwet was observed to be 6.7 during the first year, compared to 1.8 in an American community (Super, 1982). The infant's social group in Kokwet is not differentiated by sex except for the near absence of adult males. The present data indicate that the pattern of mixed sexes in the peer group

continues into middle childhood.

This pattern stands in marked contrast to Kipsigis customs of gender segregation in adulthood. The separation of men and women is inaugurated in the adolescent circumcision ceremonies, where groups of boys or girls undergo the public ordeal of circumcision or clitoridectomy, followed by a period of communal seclusion under the care and tutelage of a same-sex elder. The circumcision rites are the ceremonial focal point of the acquisition of culture for the Kipsigis, and they mark the beginning of a new life-stage in which men and women are expected to live separately from each other in many ways. As adults with their own families, women will spend much of their working time with other women in the fields while the men tend to the cattle or to the business of the community. At home, men will maintain separate huts for entertaining their male friends and for sleeping except when visiting their wives. Even meals are served separately to men, while women eat with the children.

Thus, it seems that the relatively late and mild emergence of gender segregation in children's peer groups in Kokwet, when contrasted with the American pattern, can not be explained either by a unitary factor of culture or of development. Although the cultural ethos of gender segregation in adulthood is one of the most salient aspects of Kipsigis culture, it does not seem to operate in childhood where the majority of time is spent in mixed-sex and mixed-age groups. The age pattern and extent of

gender segregation in children's peer groups in Kokwet also does not seem to fit the kind of developmental model that could be derived from research in American settings.

In order to explain the patterning of gender associations in any cultural context, whether Kokwet or American, intermediate variables must be identified. One of these appears to be the immediate social setting. Luria and Herzog (1983) have noted the influence of setting on children's choice of peers in a recent study with American school-age children. Their observations of children in school showed a high degree of gender segregation; at home in their own neighborhoods, on the other hand, less gender segregation was reported. In Kokwet, children through the age-span studied were observed in the same settings - the family homesteads - but their relationships to these settings were undergoing a process of change resulting from the interaction between their own development, as perceived by their caretakers, and the culturally defined roles and expectations of children at different ages.

The Kipsigis case highlights what is also true of the American situation: that the intermediate variable of setting is not independent of the larger cultural system in which children participate. The emergence of gender segregation in children's peer groups in the 6-9 year olds in Kokwet can be related to several general changes in parental ethnotheories of child development and the customary duties of children which influence

the structuring of settings in daily life.

The local view of child development in Kokwet sees in the years around 6 the emergence of several important abilities and personal qualities (Super & Harkness, 1983; Super, 1983). Central among them is ng'omnotet, universally translated as "intelligence" but applied especially to personal and interpersonal skills that enable one to maintain a sense of direction in one's behavior oriented to larger goals and values. Mothers of younger children are careful in keeping track of where their children are, and with whom. Around the age of 6 years, as they become ng'om, children are thought to need less immediate supervision, and a mother might feel comfortable leaving the homestead for several hours knowing that the child will exercise judgment about both activities and companions.

Around the same time, it is customary in Kokwet for children to be assigned substantial household duties, and to be expected to carry them out without the immediate presence of a parent. Girls at this age, for example, may spend much of their day taking care of an infant sibling. Both boys and girls are assigned to watching the cows, although there is a tendency for boys to be more often found in this activity, in keeping with its cultural labelling as a male domain. Children who are perceived as ng'om by their parents may also be asked to take a message to another homestead in the community, or to walk a mile or two to the local store to buy sugar or soap.

Children respond to the greater freedom and greater responsiblity given them in middle childhood by choosing their own companions to share work and play. Two girls from nearby homesteads may spend much of the day together caring for their younger siblings. Boys may find a buddy to help watch the cows - and have a good game of tag or climb a tree together in the meantime. Having become ng'om, children at this age also begin to become aware of the sex-typing of activities in adult life. In their free time boys may play together building in the mud by the stream, while girls play house.

Thus the social settings of daily life, parental theories of child behavior, and the customary duties of children operate as a system, the "developmental niche" (Harkness & Super, 1983; Super & Harkness, in press). Culture, in Whiting's phrase (Whiting, 1980), is a "provider of settings;" it also provides customs and ethnotheories that are systematically related. The organism and niche are mutually adapted, as Lewontin (1978) has illustrated with a biologist's array of examples. Children play an active role in exploiting and manipulating their niche: in the present context, we see the older children structuring their environments through the exercise of preferential patterns of association. Just when and how such gender segregation appears is the joint product of the individual and the culturally constructed niche. It would be erroneous to attribute the developmental pattern of gender segregation found by scientists

in America to phenomena of personal growth alone, even modified in expression by settings. The data presented here suggest a larger cultural perspective to be profitable, for the relationship between culture and individual development is active and interactive in both directions.

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Table 1

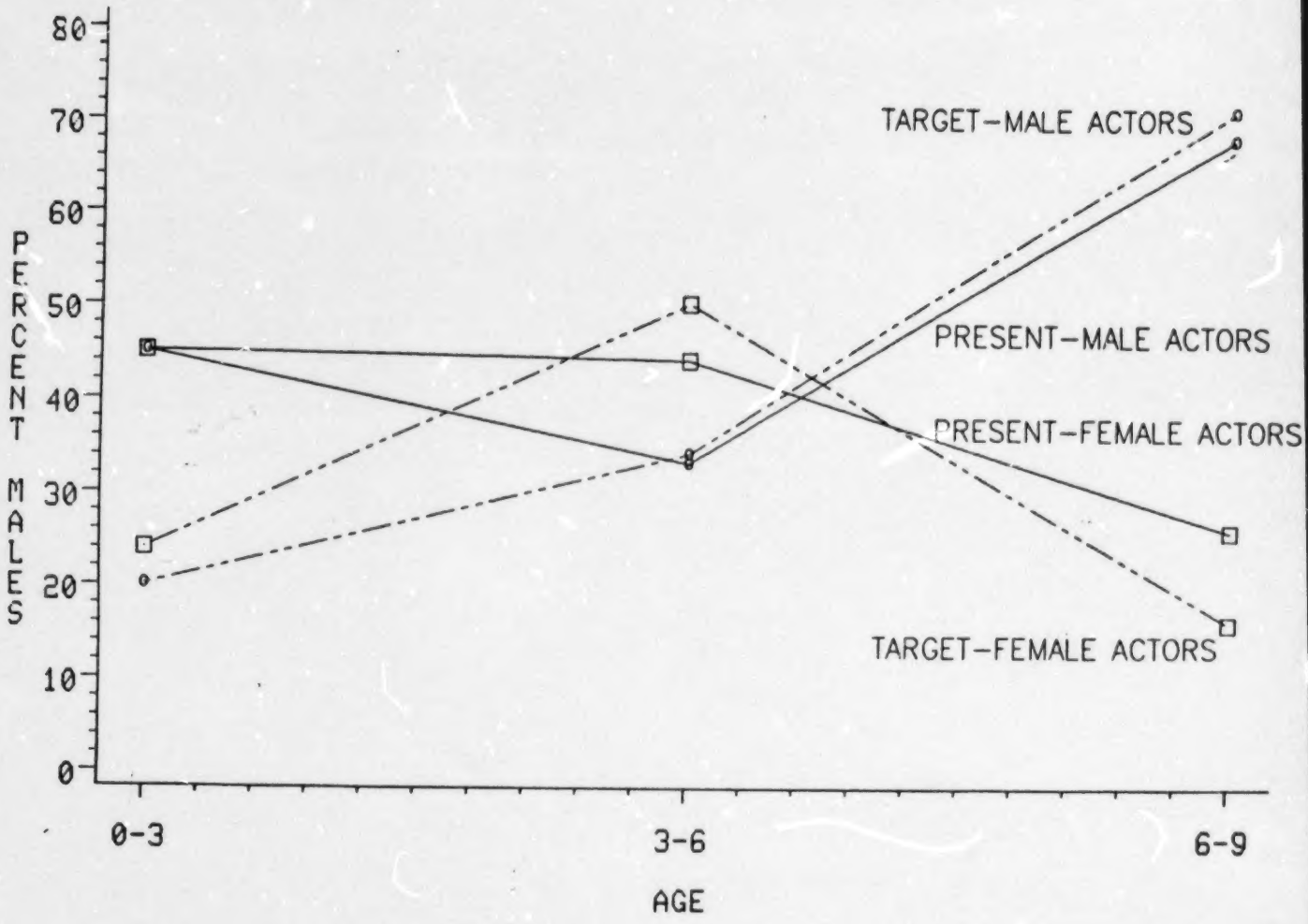
Relationship of Target Child to Peers for Three Age Groups

Age Group of Target (years)	Relationship of Peer from same homestead	from adjacent homestead	from distant homestead
0 - 3	35 (52%)	12 (18%)	20 (30%)
3 - 6	143 (65%)	50 (23%)	27 (12%)
6 - 9	67 (53%)	28 (22%)	31 (25%)

Note. $X2 = 14.67$, $df = 4$, $p = .005$

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Percent of Males Present and Percent of Male Targets in Peer Groups, for Male and Female Actors, at Three Age Levels.


80
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PERCENT MALES
TARGET-MALE ACTORS
PRESENT-MALE ACTORS
PRESENT-FEMALE ACTORS
TARGET-FEMALE ACTORS
0-3
3-6
6-9
AGE